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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the activities and outcomes of LATCH-ON (Literacy and Technology-Hands On), a literacy program for young adults with Down Syndrome based at the University of Queensland in Australia. The program's aims are to support literacy as a desirable and valued aspect in the students' quality of life through developing communication in written, oral, and visual mediums, and to foster wider friendships via literacy and technology. To achieve these aims, traditional approaches to literacy teaching are linked to computer-based learning and Internet training. A meaningful learning environment has been established at LATCH-ON through three key approaches: activities are real-life or life-like, there are genuine outcomes and real audiences for the students' work, and teaching and learning activities are shaped to the students' purposes. Finally, the program uses teaching strategies that incorporate multiple pedagogies. The program has resulted in 21 young adults participating in the program with six graduating after completing two years. Participants have been unanimous about their feelings of belonging fostered by the program. The students felt that they were accepted for who they were and perceived that LATCH-ON provided an environment where they could establish and maintain strong friendships. (CR)

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Building a community of literacy practice with young adults with intellectual disabilities

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This section takes up the main features of communities of literacy practice outlined in the first part of the paper and describes their application in a literacy program for young adults with intellectual disabilities. First, a vignette of the LATCH-ON (Literacy and Technology–Hands On) literacy program will be presented in terms of the three main features of literacy communities. These are: developing membership, knowing and risk-taking; establishing a meaningful learning environment, and the enactment of multiple roles by community members. The following section then describes three teaching strategies used in this community which include the elements of multiple pedagogies previously outlined. Specifically, the strategies are an approach to enhancing oral communication ('Hot Seat'), the 'Life Story' project, and a classroom competition ('Footy tipping') which focuses on both literacy and numeracy.

The LATCH-ON community

LATCH-ON (Literacy and Technology –Hands on) is a literacy program for young adults with Down Syndrome which is based at the University of Queensland (Moni & Jobling, in press). The program, which combines teaching and research, was established in 1998. The main aims of LATCH-ON are to support literacy as a desirable and valued aspect in the students' quality of life through developing communication in written, oral and visual mediums, and to foster wider friendships via literacy and technology. To achieve these aims, traditional approaches to literacy teaching are linked to computer-based learning and internet training. The program is conducted at the University of Queensland and students have access to sporting and library facilities as well as opportunities to interact with other students in projects and activities (Jobling and Moni, 2000).

To date, 21 young adults have attended LATCH-ON with six recently graduating after completing two years tuition. Currently 14 students participate in the program for two days a week. These students have literacy skills ranging from emergent to 12 years (Grade 6) as determined by initial assessments. Teaching staff have been drawn from early childhood, primary and secondary sectors.

Consistent with the view that literacy is a social practice and develops through negotiated activities conducted in specific social contexts, the following definition of literacy has been adopted to frame teaching and learning activities in the program:

> Literacy involves the integration of reading, writing, listening, speaking and critical thinking. It includes cultural knowledge which enables a speaker, writer or reader to use language appropriate to different social situations.
>
> (Department of Education, Employment and Training, 1991,p.4)

This definition positions the LATCH-ON program as having goals more congruent with those of a community of literacy practice than with the vocationally based post-school literacy programs more commonly available to this population (Drew, Hardman & Logan, 1996; Shannon, 1995). In addition to this theoretical congruency, there is also more tangible evidence to support a construction of LATCH-ON as a community of literacy practice.

Fostering membership, knowing and risk

In a recent evaluation, the LATCH-ON students were unanimous about their feelings of belonging to a unique community. The students felt that they were accepted for who they were and perceived that LATCH-ON provided an environment where they could establish and maintain strong friendships.

Opportunities for making choices, decisions, and taking risks are woven into the fabric of LATCH-ON. Such opportunities are often related to students' self-regulation. For example, students may choose when to complete an activity, the order in which they take on tasks, or a reading book to share. They may also be asked to think about what they have learned during the day when writing their diaries. They also make choices about when to take breaks, whether to participate in oral activities and about what kinds of writing they want to do.

Taking a risk may mean reading a different kind of text, or writing in a new genre, or constructing knowledge and meaning from their own experiences rather than relying on an external authority for information.

Creating a meaningful learning environment

A meaningful learning environment has been established at LATCH-ON through three key approaches. First, activities are real-life or life-like. This means that there are connections between what the students read, write and discuss in class and their worlds beyond the program. Such activities may include writing a shopping list, organising a social event, writing a birthday greeting, making a speech on a birthday, writing a birthday wish list where items are prioritised, sending an e-mail to a friend, looking a up the web page for a favourite TV program, or writing a letter to the Spice girls!

Second, there are genuine outcomes and real audiences for the students' work. Our major ongoing project is the publication of a newsletter which is mailed to the local Down Syndrome community, local schools, educational institutions and professional associations in Australia and overseas. The newsletter provides an authentic outlet for students' work and demonstrates that their ideas and language contributions are valued. Through the newsletter we are also able build on the students' interests, to introduce them to a broader range of genres, and to challenge them to write about new experiences and topics.

One of the aims of LATCH-ON is to foster friendships which reach out into the wider community. To achieve this aim, the program includes internet training activities which enable students to link up with friends and relatives. Such activities provide connections between their learning and their present and future lives. For example, in 1999 one student was able e-mail her older sister who was working in London. Students also communicate with friends and relatives interstate, and past students keep in contact with current students via internet links.

The third strategy is to shape the teaching and learning activities to the students' purposes. For example, at the start of the year the students establish personal goals for their reading, writing, speaking and internet use. These goals are used to develop the term's activities within the general program framework and enable us to link activities both with their interests and with their lives outside the classroom.

Enacting multiple roles

All LATCH-ON teaching and learning activities are based on the understanding that all of the students are readers and writers and there are high expectations of them as readers and writers. Some students require more support than others and our role is one of flexing and responding to meet individual needs. In this context we are acting as experts who guide the students to achieve their goals.

Many of the topics that students select to read, write, and talk about are related to their own interests such as playing computer games, participating in drama or dance activities and performances, playing the piano, tinkering with electronic gadgets, designing houses, and going to the movies. The students adopt the role of experts in these fields and take the lead in negotiating the form and content of written and spoken outcomes.

Teaching strategies incorporating multiple pedagogies

'Hot Seat'

'Hot Seat' occurs everyday at LATCH-On as part of regular classroom activities. It is a strategy used to develop oral communication skills. Students are invited, on a voluntary basis, to sit in the hot seat chair and talk to the group about events, experiences, possessions and photographs that have meaning in their lives. The focus of teaching during this session is on developing the students' confidence in speaking, on improving their oral skills through scaffolding the talk, and on developing active listeners. 'Hot Seat' allows students to be both experts in their own life experiences and novices who need assistance to produce sustained sequences of conversation. While 'Hot Seat' provides opportunities for practice in speaking, the strategy also combines elements of explicit teaching, scaffolding, and guided speaking and listening. For example, the teaching staff (and visitors) model effective communication by sharing their own experiences and treasures. Teaching staff also model active listening by asking questions and responding to the talk. Cues and prompts, in the form of question cards or topic cards, are used to support both the listeners and the speakers. The students often scaffold their own talk by bringing in a possession or photographs which assist them to talk about their experiences. Self-initiated 'Hot Seat' topics for the last week of class this semester suggest some of the diversity of students' contributions. Students talked about: a student article about last year's graduation (read aloud), family photographs of a new niece, a 21st birthday party speech with photos; concerts by Savage Garden and Ricky Martin, and the recent death of a friend.

The 'Life story' project

The students undertake a major project that culminates in the compilation of their life stories to be presented to their parents on graduation night. During their work on this project the students are positioned as experts in their own lives. While the teaching staff provide a framework for the students to complete the project, for example by suggesting chapter headings, research questions, writing activities and writing scaffolds, the students drive the project and actively select their own resources and topics. In addition, they are also responsible for responsible for making final decisions about what is included in their life story folio. For example they select photos, significant events in their lives to write about, and identify their hopes and dreams for the future.

This project allows us to re-visit familiar genres and thus provides a an opportunity for the students to practice writing in genres where they have already achieved success, for example, they write about their families, their pets and review their favourite TV shows and movies. It also allows us to introduce new

genres in an environment where the students are motivated by the content and outcomes of their writing and so are more likely to take risks in writing in different ways. For example, the students were asked to interview their parents about their babyhood. The students had difficulty generating questions and were resistant to the activity at first. However, after they practised asking the questions in class they completed the task. They enjoyed sharing the tapes of their interviews in class and were motivated to conduct further interviews with other family members and friends. As they complete their life stories thus far, the students are also introduced to more formal genres such as writing formal letters, preparing resumes, job interviews and telephone interviews.

This project facilitates flexible and responsive teaching. For example, whole group approaches are used to explicitly teach new genres. Writing scaffolds are prepared for students to use independently when they are writing in familiar genres. Mini-lessons in small groups are conducted when two or more students are working on the same part of their life stories. Some texts are jointly constructed according to students' individual needs.

'Footy tipping'

'Footy tipping' is an activity based on the old ANZAC tradition of trying to second guess the outcome of any sporting event! It may seem unusual to include a weekly rugby league tipping competition as an activity which incorporates multiple pedagogies but it has been included in this paper as an example of a literacy and numeracy activity that has purpose and value in these students' lives. Living in Brisbane, the home of the current rugby league competition leaders, it is hard to escape newspaper and TV stories about the Brisbane Broncos. Rugby league and the Broncos are part of these young adults' lives. Some of them belong to the Broncos social club, they go to the games, or watch them on TV with their families. Many of the students belong to a social club for young adults with Down Syndrome that is sponsored by the Broncos' charity program. The students therefore are not only experts in the Broncos but are also motivated to read, write and talk about the team.

Each week the students work out which team the Broncos are playing, decide whether the game will be at home or away, guess what the score will be, and enter the score on a chart. This activity requires the students to retrieve information from a chart, to read a table, and to enter data into a table. They also have to distinguish between low and high numbers, estimate a score and complete several subtraction sums to identify the competition winner. As there are at least 20 weeks of competition, plus international games and finals, the students have plenty of opportunities to practice all of these skills. Currently the students run this activity themselves.

This activity also involves choice and risk. The students have to make decisions about the score and also risk being wrong. There are no prizes, but by participating in this activity they develop an understanding that being wrong is OK and that taking a risk can be fun (as I know very little about rugby league I often provide an excellent model of how to lose with humour!).

Conclusion

By drawing on a repertoire of teaching approaches we can build a learning community of literacy practice which responds effectively to change, and which flexes to support the burgeoning identities of these young adults as they broaden and deepen their literacy experiences.

Multiple pedagogies help us to design teaching and learning activities that better meet the students' language and literacy needs thus enabling them present themselves to their families and communities in positive ways. They are able to position themselves as readers and writers who have something meaningful to share, as confident communicators in a range of social contexts, and as competent social participants in the LATCH-ON community, in their family network, friendship circles and in their future lives.

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